

## EUSAPIA'S SAPIENT FOOT: A NEW RECONSIDERATION OF THE FEILDING REPORT

by MASSIMO POLIDORO and GIAN MARCO RINALDI

### ABSTRACT

This paper presents a reconsideration of the 'Feilding Report' but, unlike a similar previous paper by Richard Wiseman, our work concentrates on the hypothesis that all of the phenomena presented by Eusapia Palladino during the 1908 Naples séances could have been produced without the help of secret accomplices. It is suggested that her ability to free her limbs via 'substitution', the psychological conditions present at the séances and the gullibility of the experimenters were enough to account for the phenomena. It is proposed that her secret weapon lay in her left foot and various demonstrations being given at the séances are examined in detail to show how this could be so. This paper also examines the psychological aspects of the deceptions supposedly being perpetrated by Eusapia and gives a few suggestions on how better controls might have helped in avoiding being deceived.

### INTRODUCTION

Recently, Richard Wiseman (1992a) has quite effectively illustrated how the Feilding Report (Feilding, Baggally & Carrington, 1909) was badly flawed and has pointed out how the controls against fraud, as described by the investigators, were inadequate. This he has shown by taking into consideration the hypothesis that an accomplice may have been present within Palladino's séance cabinet. This idea has stimulated an interesting debate in the pages of the *Journal*, with Wiseman's critics (Barrington, 1992; 1993; Fontana, 1992; 1993; Martínez-Taboas & Francia, 1993) trying to disprove his hypothesis and Wiseman (1993a; 1993b; 1993c; 1993d) responding point by point to each criticism.

Aside from the question of whether an accomplice was really present or not at the 1908 Naples séances, what, we think, has clearly emerged from Wiseman's work is that the three investigators were simply no match for Eusapia. This point we would like to stress further by taking into consideration a different 'normal' explanation for Palladino's phenomena as described in the Feilding Report (from now on referred to as the Report), one that has been discarded too quickly. Namely, that of her ability to free her limbs via 'substitution'. Wiseman (1992a) says that: "It seems implausible that Palladino would, under these conditions, be able to *continually* perform such trickery" and concludes that "the 'substitution' hypothesis seems able to explain, at best, a relatively small number of reported phenomena" (p.134). However, a re-examination of the conditions and of a few episodes described in the Report may suggest otherwise.

### THE INVESTIGATING COMMITTEE

It must be stressed that the SPR had already had a chance to examine Palladino in Cambridge, thirteen years earlier (Hodgson, 1895), and that it had reached the conclusion that systematic fraud had been used and that there was

no adequate reason for concluding in favour of any supernormal agency having been at work during the course of the sittings. However, in consideration of the attention that Eusapia had continued to attract among distinguished scientists on the Continent, such as Camille Flammarion, Marie Curie, Oliver Lodge, Charles Richet, Enrico Morselli and many others, the Society felt that her case could not be lightly dismissed and decided to reopen it.

Since it was clearly felt that the object of the investigation was primarily to determine whether the phenomena were due to trickery or not, it was essential, Hodgson being now dead, that the investigators had to be persons well versed in the methods of trickery. But were they really?

In the Report this is how Feilding, Baggally and Carrington's credentials are given (pp.319-320):-

Mr. Carrington has been for some time the investigator for the American Society for Psychical Research, and is the author of a book, *The Physical Phenomena of Spiritualism* (...), in which is a detailed exposure of the tricks employed by fraudulent mediums, of which he has made a special study. For many years Mr. Carrington has been an amateur conjurer, and is able to reproduce almost any of the slate writing and other "tests" offered by the average "medium". In the course of his work for the American Society he has investigated many cases of poltergeists, physical phenomena, etc., etc., and in all the ten years of such work had never seen anything that he was unable to account for by trickery, which in many cases he could improve upon.

Mr. Baggally has similarly been for many years an investigator of the phenomena of spiritualism and has been specially interested in the physical phenomena. He, also, is an amateur conjurer of much experience. Notwithstanding the fact that he had investigated nearly all the mediums who have appeared upon the spiritualist horizon since the days of D. D. Home, he, like Mr. Carrington, had never yet met with what appeared to him a genuine example of any agency other than that of more or less easily discoverable trickery, and before the experiments with Eusapia, had come to an entirely negative conclusion as to the probability of any genuine physical phenomena.

Mr. Feilding, though not himself a conjurer, had had a reasonably extensive experience in the investigation of physical phenomena and the advantage of a fairly complete education at the hands of fraudulent mediums. While preserving an open mind as to the possibility of the existence of some hitherto unascertained force in nature whereby the manifestations testified to by so many observers of high standing were produced, the discovery of repeated fraud had produced in him an attitude of complete scepticism as regards the probability of his ever finding any examples of the exercise of such a force.

This certainly sounds impressive, but from what one can ascertain by reading the Report such "complete scepticism" and high level of competence of the researchers in detecting trickery must have disappeared somewhere.

Let us examine, for example, an episode which occurred during the eighth séance (pp.499-500). Sometimes, but it was not a rule, Eusapia's feet were tied with cords: for this particular séance each foot had been tied with a separate cord to the legs of the experimenters' chairs, at the right and left side of the table. Eusapia asked Feilding to feel the cord of her left leg, to see whether it was fastened. He checked both cords around the left and right leg and found that they were still around them. After this, Eusapia said that she was tired and needed some rest, so she put her head on the table and stayed there, while the experimenters thought they had control of her hands. The lights

were faint, but there was not complete darkness. After two minutes, the experimenters saw one cord being thrown on the table: the other end was still fastened to the experimenters' chair, but Eusapia's left foot was free.

It was Baggally, "an expert knot-tier" (p.504), who had tied the cord with four knots around Eusapia's ankles: they were so tight that when, at the end of the séance, he had to unfasten the cord around the other ankle, it took him . . . well, "about two minutes".

This episode could at least have given the experimenters a chance to admit that those knots were not all that difficult to untie surreptitiously, that the cord maybe was not the best suited for the purpose, that the hands of the medium were not being carefully controlled, that the light was insufficient for observing her movements and, in the end, that all of them (there were, for this séance, four more observers) had been unable to prevent Eusapia from freeing herself when she wished to do so. Nothing of this kind ever passed through their minds. On the contrary, even after this fact they still believe that she was unable to untie herself, and list the "untying of knots" as one of the "marvels" produced at the séances (pp.330, 340, 557). They do not even refer to the episode in the Notes preceding the report of Séance VIII; and in those following it only Feilding mentions it, lamenting the fact that "Eusapia's 'spirits' or 'fluidic force', or whatever the agency might be which produced them" had to "intrude into a series of respectable phenomena one of such indubitably Davenportish associations as the untying of the cord" (p.504). Not one of them accuses her of fraud.

#### THE GENERAL CONDITIONS OF THE SÉANCES

The eleven séances were held at the Hotel Victoria,<sup>1</sup> in Naples, in Feilding's room on the fifth floor; they usually started at 10 p.m. and lasted about three hours. The experimenters (usually three, sometimes two, sometimes three plus some visiting observers) sat at the table with Eusapia, and the stenographer was at another table. The fact that all the happenings observed during the séances have been described to the stenographer and then published in detail in the Report has always been cause for admiration. We too feel that the Report is unique, not in the sense of offering sound proof of supernormal activity, however, but in the fact that it offers a much better description of Eusapia's methods of trickery, already generally known but never presented in such detail. In all, it is a fascinating opportunity to admire Palladino's superb deceptions.

---

<sup>1</sup> The exact location of the Hotel Victoria (Vittoria, in Italian) has recently been found by us, it was in: Via Partenope 8, along the beach. From an old *Touring Club Guide* (dated 1960) it also appears that the Hotel was second-rate (at least in 1960) and had 60 rooms (21 with bathrooms); the price for a room was between 800 and 1300 lire (without bathroom).

Further research, conducted with the help of Dr Massimo Finizio, living in Naples, has shown that in recent years the Hotel had reduced the number of rooms and had finally been closed: in its place there is now the branch of the Banca Popolare di Novara. The Bank, however, occupies only the first floor. The other floors have been converted into private apartments. Since considerable renovation work has been done on the building during the years (also, a sixth floor has been added), and since it has been impossible to find any living member of the original Hotel staff, it appears very difficult now to have first-hand information on the Hotel, Feilding's room or its doors.

By hanging two thin black cashmere curtains, supplied by Eusapia, in an angle of the room the spirit cabinet was located; inside it, a small table and various toy music instruments, purchased for the occasion, were placed. The depth from the angle of the walls to the middle of the curtains was 2 ft. 8 ins. (80 cm). Immediately in front of it, with the back of her chair touching the curtains, as can be seen by the picture facing p.321 (a less clear copy is also reproduced in Wiseman, 1992, p.143), sat Eusapia.

She had before her her custom-made rectangular table: she sat at the narrow end of it and the experimenters on every other side.

These were Eusapia's usual conditions of work, the ones she dictated to the experimenters and the ones they allowed her: even the curtains and the table were her own. The only new condition was the presence of the stenographer, to whom the experimenters continuously dictated their observations: a fantastic advantage for Eusapia, who could constantly be kept informed on the state of the controls moment by moment.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Lights*

In describing how the Naples séances and those in Cambridge differed, the researchers note (pp.315-16):-

None of the present writers had the advantage of being present at these Cambridge sittings, which appear to have differed markedly in certain respects from those which form the subject of the present report. The chief points of difference lie in the condition of light and in the degree of control of her hands permitted by Eusapia.

We will examine later the degree of control of her hands; it is interesting now to see what exactly were the conditions of light "permitted by Eusapia".

Since illumination was very important in allowing Eusapia to present the effects as needed, she went so far as to dictate how this should be: and the experimenters, again, satisfied her requests. They prepared, thus, an elaborate system of electric lights, in order to produce varying degrees of illuminating power. This allowed an ample choice of low-power lights: from dim light (the strongest prevailing light is described as a light "in which we were able to read small print"—p.331) to almost pitch black, and it was Eusapia who requested, during the séances, whether the lights had to be raised or lowered according to her needs. Here are the descriptions of the various lights:-

Light I: a lamp, covered by three thicknesses of thin brown tissue paper, arranged and hung from the ceiling at a distance of 6 feet (2 metres) from the position of the medium's head.

Light II: photographic light (a candle lamp) with red linen sides, standing on stenographer's table plus light coming from next room, which was lit by an ordinary electric light, the door being ajar about 6 inches.

---

<sup>2</sup> The experimenters dictated in English, but it can be assumed that Eusapia, having already been tested in various parts of Europe for many years, often with English-speaking researchers, was able to understand at least the meaning of the simple and typical phrases that were continually repeated by the experimenters to define the controls. That this is the case, and that Eusapia wanted for things to be also said in Italian (Feilding, at least, appears to have some knowledge of the language) is confirmed by Feilding, who notes that Eusapia: "detests English, and is always annoyed when she does not know what is being said, yet has a *flair* for the meaning of things so remarkable as to amount almost to the dignity of telepathic perception (. . .)" (p.522).

Light III: light further lessened by closing the door more, only red lamp and feeble light coming through crack in door remaining: shapes were visible.

Light IV: Still less light, the door into the next room being further closed: shapes not visible.

Light V: Electric light turned right out. Only photographic lamp on stenographer's table not shaded.

Light VI: Photographic lamp shaded so as to throw light only on to stenographer's book.

From Séance III, however, a change was made in the lighting arrangements by the "fitting up of a group of four electric lamps hanging in the same position as the original lamp. By means of a commutator standing on the shorthand writer's table, the light could be successively reduced from the ordinary light of the room down to a rather faint glow" (p.375).

It is important to stress the fact that Eusapia did not usually want complete darkness, but exactly the right amount of light that she needed, according to the phenomena she was going to produce or the controls to which she was subjected. If, for example, she was going to move an object, she needed enough light to allow the sitters to see the object move, but not enough that they could understand how the movement was being accomplished.

Furthermore, as opposed to complete darkness, such dim-light conditions present various other advantages for a medium. The experimenters, for example, have already enough trouble trying to see what phenomena are happening that their attention is obviously distracted from the controls, here mainly of a tactile kind, of hands and feet. Then, with some suggestions, it is easy to lead people to believe they are seeing things that are not so. Finally, for a medium it is very useful to continually see the experimenters, to know where they are and what they are doing and, in such a way, prevent any unpleasant surprise.

### *The Skirt*

As can be seen from the picture of Eusapia in the Report (facing p.321), Eusapia is wearing black clothing with a long full skirt. When she is seated, the skirt covers quite widely the sides and the front of the chair, hiding both Eusapia's feet and the ends of the table legs close to her. On the back, the skirt touches the curtains, again black. In near darkness these are the perfect conditions for allowing her to use her feet to raise the table or to bring one foot inside the cabinet behind her.

### *The Table*

This was a custom-made table, the one Eusapia used in most of her séances: 2 ft. 10½ ins. (87 cm) long, by 1 ft 7¼ ins. (48 cm) broad and weighing only 10½ lbs. (4.75 kg). Such a light table is very easy to raise: imagine Eusapia sitting at the narrow end of it, with her legs touching the inside legs of the table (separated from one another by 1 ft 4½ ins. (41 cm), the broad measure minus the width of the legs of the table). By slightly opening her legs she could very easily seize the table and move it about or raise it a few inches from the ground.

### *The Phenomena*

The phenomena happening during the eleven séances (470 are described) belong to Eusapia's usual repertoire. First of all there were the movements and levitations of the séance table: 'partial' levitations, where the table remained tilted at an angle on two legs, and 'complete' levitations, where the table was lifted on all four legs simultaneously. Levitations of this kind lasted momentarily "but occasionally for several seconds" (p.347) and the table was raised, at the most, about a foot off the ground.

Then there were the phenomena happening inside the cabinet: noises coming from it, objects moved about or taken out, appearances of indefinable objects from the curtains and movements of the same. Also, a small stool, which stood about 3 feet from the medium, was occasionally moved and various touches were felt by the experimenters.

Note that all the phenomena occurred within hand or foot distance from the medium.

### *The Methods Used by Eusapia to Produce the Phenomena*

It is well known from the many exposures to which Eusapia was subjected that she was not the kind of medium who used trick apparatus or conjuring machines. At most she could use a thread or hair for some PK demonstrations, but typically she relied only on her bare hands and feet. This was enough to produce the phenomena described: to move or levitate a table she could use hands and/or feet and/or legs; to move a curtain or the objects in the cabinet she could use the hand, the elbow or, mainly, the foot.

Let us examine, for example, the complete levitation of the table. Eusapia's main method of accomplishing such an effect was to tilt it sideways on two legs (usually the ones on her right side), by pressing on top of it; then, she inserted her left foot under the left table leg closer to her. This position is known as the 'human clamp': by pressing with her left hand on the table, she could straighten it and raise it, horizontally, at different heights. If she had her left heel on top of the experimenter sitting on her left, she could only raise her toes and, consequently, the table could only 'levitate' a few inches. However, if she could control the foot of the experimenter on her left by different means (i.e. by touching his foot with her right foot, or by having his foot on top of her empty boot) she could very easily hold the table much higher. Now, with this method in mind, read the following description of a complete levitation which occurred during Séance II. The conditions are as follows: Eusapia's hands are being held flat on the top of the table, partly resting on the experimenters' hands; C. (Carrington) sits on her left, F. (Feilding) on her right (p.364):-

10.58 p.m. The table tilts on the two right legs.

C. The medium's left hand is held in mine over the table, her left foot being pressed on my right, and my right knee being in contact with her left knee.

F. Her right hand was on my shoulder.

F. The table was then completely levitated, and both C. and she afterwards pressed on C's side of the table, which went up in spite of their pressure.

C. I pressed strongly.

11.00 p.m. Complete levitation of the table.

This 'poverty' of means certainly posed a limit to the spectacularity of the phenomena; besides which, it protected her from the risks of deliberate fraud. In fact, whenever she was caught using a free limb, she claimed she was in a trance and excused herself by saying that she acted involuntarily; furthermore, she blamed the experimenters for not being sufficiently alert with their controls. In similar cases the experimenters were more than willing to think her behaviour was innocent. This she could not have done had she decided to go into the materialization business and impersonate her 'John King': she could hardly claim involuntariness for a fake beard.

By using only hands and feet, her chances of success depended entirely on whether the experimenters' controls allowed her to use them or not. This was her main trick, an art in which she certainly was a recognized master, the ability to free hands and feet from the experimenters' control.

### *The Control of Hands and Feet*

In discussing the first Cambridge sittings with Eusapia, the three researchers note that: "Dr. Hodgson had been invited over from America to attend these sittings, and his observations, with those of other sitters, ended in convincing all those who had any prolonged experience of the sittings that the substitution of hands and feet described by Prof. Richet as possible, and already detected by Dr. Reichmann, constantly occurred and could be observed if attention was directed to it" (p.315). On what basis, then, are we asked to believe that the phenomena described in the Report are authentic? "The chief points of difference", the authors write (as we have noted), "lie in the condition of light and in the degree of control of her hands *permitted* by Eusapia" (p.316, *italics ours*). As for the lights, we have already seen how Eusapia could obtain the exact kind of illumination that she desired; let us now discuss the control of hands and feet that Eusapia "permitted".

Usually, as in the Neapolitan séances, the control was performed by the two experimenters sitting at the sides of the table, on the right and left of Eusapia. The one on the right controlled her right hand and foot; parallel control was exerted by the one on the left. By 'controlling' here is meant preventing the medium from using her hands or feet to perform the phenomena.

If only they had wished it would have been very easy for the experimenters to apply a really effective control: the hand, or the wrist, of the medium had to be kept tight, never letting it go; the ankle had to be held tightly between the legs and, with his other hand, the experimenter could have been free to check the knee and head of the medium. In this way, it would have been impossible for Eusapia to accomplish anything, even in pitch darkness. But this is in no way the kind of control that was being used by Feilding and his associates. What happened here, as clearly emerges from the transcripts of the séances, is that it was not the experimenters who were controlling the medium; but, rather, it was the medium who controlled the experimenters.

Here, from the stenographed transcription of the séances, are some examples of how the experimenters performed their controls: "Both feet being on our feet" (350); "Her right foot was on mine" (352); "Her left foot was on my right foot. My right hand was held by the medium beneath the table in her lap about one foot from the table" (352); "Her right hand was on my left hand" (363); "Her

left hand was over my right" (363), and so on. As stated above, it was the medium holding the experimenters' hands and feet still, and not vice versa.

These conditions were exactly what was needed for Eusapia to perform her 'classic' number: the substitution of a limb.

The trick consisted, for example, in freeing one hand and using the other one to keep contact with the hands of both experimenters: one of the medium's hands partly on top of the hand of one experimenter and partly on the hand of the other; or the hand of an experimenter on the back of the hand of the medium, and this same hand on top of the hand of the other experimenter. She could also free both her hands, by letting the experimenters hold on to each other's hands, and letting them think they were each holding Eusapia's hands; however, this special trick does not seem to have been required for these séances.

Obviously the Feilding group was perfectly aware of Eusapia's ability in the substitution trick; and it seems paradoxical that, although they were aware of it, they allowed their conditions to be so little restrictive as to make it easy for the medium to accomplish this same trick. Their conviction was that, being aware of the trick, they would have been able to detect it should she have used it (p.357): this is a conviction that an experimenter should never have, especially in similar conditions. Every now and then they tried to check if there had been a substitution (for example, by checking the position of the fingers if that was really the hand they thought they were holding); but this, according to the transcripts, only happened occasionally. It must be stated that on a few occasions they found that a substitution had in effect been made, but they noticed it only by chance (for example, somebody had been able to discern, in near darkness, her free hand moving about) and only after the fact, not while it was happening. They had to admit (p.326) that:-

... the skill with which the substitution was performed was remarkable. The tactile sensation of continuity of contact was unbroken. On neither occasion in Séance III., when the substitution was performed, was F. aware of it, though it was immediately seen by C., on whose side the hand was released; while in Séance XI., though visible to F. from the other side of the table, the release was not felt either by him or by Mrs. H., who was controlling on the side on which it happened.

Even easier still was the substitution of a foot: when, as it often happened, each of the two experimenters felt a medium's foot on top of his, it could have been only one foot, pressing with the heel on the shoe of one experimenter and with the toes on the shoe of the other. Only rarely, according to the transcripts, one of the experimenters thought to check with a hand under the table and feel whether the medium's knees and legs were both where they were supposed to be. The medium, then, after freeing one foot, slipped it out of the shoe (which remained in its place and could be mistaken for the foot) and could use it, as we shall see, to produce the phenomena.

#### EUSAPIA'S SAPIENT FOOT

Eusapia's secret weapon was precisely her left foot. It is with it, even during these séances, that she accomplished her best demonstrations: see, for example, the final part of Séance VI, when the phenomena happened that looked the most impressive to the experimenters.



The substitution of the foot was much easier to accomplish than that of the hand because it happened under the table, where the light was extremely dim; furthermore there was the cover of the large skirt. The structure of the table also helped in many ways. Sitting at the narrow end not only allowed Eusapia to move it about by slightly opening her legs; but also, being so narrow it caused the two experimenters sitting at the sides to have the toes of their feet very close to one another: the ideal position that allowed Eusapia, with just one foot placed sideways, to keep contact with both the experimenters' feet.

The main advantage, however, rests in the fact that the three experimenters did not suspect that she could use a foot to produce the majority of the phenomena they were experiencing. In fact, they could think that she could use the foot to raise the table, but it never crossed their minds that she could also move with it the objects in the cabinet behind her, or produce the bulges on the curtain behind her at the height of her head, or touch the experimenters on the face. Eusapia was, by then, 54 and was quite heavy: she did not look at all like a contortionist. Thus, it never dawned on the experimenters, as it appears many times from the Report, that Eusapia could have a hip so articulated to allow her such movements while she was sitting with her bust still. For example, when they see a bulge in the curtain (being formed from the inside to the outside of the cabinet) they think of a thread, but then they have to discard the hypothesis because there are no threads and because the bulge is rounded and not pointed, as it would be if there were a thread attached to the curtain. Sometimes, Eusapia allows them to touch or feel, through the curtain, that something that produces the bulges; they then feel that there are fingers and nails on the fingers, and conclude without a doubt that it's a hand; then, they immediately check for the medium's hands and, finding them both on the table, they surrender to the evidence of an inexplicable phenomenon.

It also happens that Eusapia lets her feet come slightly out of the curtains (with a very dim light, obviously), and then the experimenters think they are watching some kind of monster which they describe as like . . . a small head with a long neck. Never do they think to check where her feet are.

That Eusapia's secret weapon was the articulated hip is not something which we are conjecturing about, it is a proven fact. It is understandable that given her age and size this supposition could look ridiculous, but the proof that Eusapia was still very active and agile came the year following the Naples séances, during the disastrous American tour. Here, conducting the experiments, were three experimenters much more cunning than Feilding, Baggally and Carrington. We shall soon discuss this. For the moment, it is interesting to note a curious forgotten episode.

### *Warnings from 'Gurney' and 'Myers'*

It happened a few months before the séances in Naples and is related by Alice Johnson (1908). Those were the years when the leaders of the SPR, and in particular Johnson, were discovering the concept of 'cross-correspondence'. One of the main 'automatists' was Mrs Holland. In some of the messages received by Mrs Holland in 1905 there were references to Eusapia and the problems posed by the control of her phenomena. The 'entities' communicating were usually those of Edmund Gurney and Frederic Myers, who sent to

Johnson, through Mrs Holland, suggestions on the subject. Here is a suggestion by 'Gurney' (Johnson, 1908, p.276): "Her [Eusapia's] feet are very important—Next time can't Miss J [Johnson] sit with the sapient feet both touching hers—Let her fix her thoughts on the *feet* and prevent the least movement of them". (Eusapia was often also called *Sapia*, and *Sapiant Foot* was quite a nice word-play). And here is a suggestion by 'Myers' (ibid., p.277): "Ask her [Eusapia] to allow you to secure each foot in a slight card-board box—case or cover—She will refuse for the instep does most of the phenomena of raps and movement".

Probably Mrs Holland was writing such phrases because she had read some papers dealing with the discussions being held at the time on Eusapia's phenomena; or because she knew that Johnson was quite sceptical; it is certain that the leaders of the SPR, so anxious to obtain messages from their dead founders, could have taken these in better consideration.

### *The American Incidents*

After the exhilarating Naples séances, Carrington went back to America, where he became an impresario and organized Eusapia, in 1909–1910, a tour for a very handsome cachet (some 125 dollars for a single séance: quite a lot of money in those days). It is well known what happened during that tour, but it is worth reporting in full a couple of episodes, as described by the American witnesses. We would like to point out that in the Report of the Neapolitan séances the phenomena repeatedly described are exactly the same as the ones Eusapia produced in the American séances, when the 'sapience' of her left foot was discovered—the only difference being that, in Naples, not one of the experimenters ever suspected that the phenomena might be produced by a foot.

The first description is by Hugo Munsterberg, the famous psychologist and philosopher of German birth, who worked at Harvard University. It refers to a séance held on the night of December 18, 1909 (quoted in Hansel, pp.240–241):—

One week before Christmas, at the midnight hour, I sat again at Madame Palladino's favorite left side and a well-known scientist on her right. We had her under strictest supervision. Her left hand grasped my hand, her right hand was held by her right neighbor, her left foot rested on my foot while her right was pressing the foot of her other neighbor. For an hour the regulation performance had gone on. But now we sat in the darkened room in the highest expectancy while Mr. Carrington begged John [King, Eusapia's spirit control] to touch my arm and then to lift the table in the cabinet behind her and John really came. He touched me distinctly on my hip and then on my arm and at last he pulled my sleeve at the elbow. I plainly felt the thumb and the fingers. It was most uncanny. And, finally, John was to lift the table in the cabinet. We held both her hands, we felt both her feet, and yet the table three feet behind her began to scratch the floor and we expected it to be lifted. But instead, there suddenly came a wild, yelling scream. It was such a scream as I have never heard before in my life, not even in Sarah Bernhardt's most thrilling scenes. It was a scream as if a dagger had stabbed Eusapia right through the heart.

What had happened? Neither she nor Mr. Carrington had the slightest idea that a man was lying flat on the floor and had succeeded in slipping noiselessly like a snail below the curtain into the cabinet. I had told him that I expected wires stretched out from her body and he looked out for them. What a surprise when he saw that she had simply freed her foot from her shoe and with an athletic backward movement of the leg was reaching out and fishing with her toes for the guitar and the table in the cabinet! And then lying on the floor he grasped her foot and caught her heel with firm

hand, and she responded with the wild scream which indicated that she knew that at last she was trapped and her glory had shattered.

Her achievement was splendid. She had lifted her unshod foot to the height of my arm when she touched me under cover of the curtain, without changing in the least the position of her body. When her foot played thumb and fingers the game was also neat throughout. To be sure, I remember before she was to reach out for the table behind her, she suddenly felt need of touching my left hand too, and for that purpose she leaned heavily over the table at which we were sitting. She said that she must do it because her spiritual fluid had become too strong and the touch would relieve her. As a matter of course in leaning forward with the upper half of her body she became able to push her foot further backward and thus to reach the light table, which probably stood a few inches too far. And then came the scream and the doom.

Notwithstanding the damning exposure, Carrington kept Eusapia in America and had her continue giving séances during the following months. In one of these, however, unknown to her, three professional magicians, W. S. Davis, J. L. Kellogg, and J. W. Sargent, together with J. L. Rinn, an amateur magician and friend of Houdini, participated and detected the exact methodology used by her to produce the phenomena. A report on this exposure was published in *Science* (Miller, 1910). Rinn and a Columbia student, Warner C. Payne, had been hiding under the chairs of the experimenters during this séance held on April 24 at Columbia University. From this position they had been able to witness the substitution of foot: they saw the medium free her left leg by maneuvering her right foot so that her heel rested on Davis' toe and her toe on Kellogg's toe. What happened then is the usual repertoire of phenomena, identical to those observed in Naples (quoted in Hansel, p. 242):-

In a few moments, after some ejaculations in Italian from the medium, the table began to wobble from side to side; and a foot came from underneath the dress of the medium and placed the toe underneath the leg of the table on the left side of the medium, and, pressing upward, gave it a little chuck into the air. . . . A short time after the lights were lowered she swung her left foot free from her dress at the back and kicked the curtain of the cabinet quickly, which caused it to bulge out toward the sitters. This was done several times so daringly that under the chairs where I lay it seemed almost impossible that the people above the table could not have observed it.

Later the medium placed her left leg back into the cabinet and pulled out from behind the curtain a small table with certain articles upon it, which was dashed to the floor in front of the cabinet on the left-hand side. It remained there in varying positions and was kicked by the medium a number of times. At one time the medium juggled the table that had been kicked out from behind the curtain on the end of her left toe in a very clever manner, so that it gave the appearance as if the table was floating in the air.

It was the end of Eusapia's American tour and also of her career. Carrington did admit that sometimes the medium cheated, but he insisted that on other occasions she was completely genuine; he stayed with his claim until the end of his long life in 1958.

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS

There are various psychological aspects to be considered, to have a better idea of the conditions in which the Feilding group operated. We have already discussed the submission of the experimenters to the medium, and their wish never to irritate her. This of course, had an influence on the kind of control

they were 'allowed' to apply: "The degree of control permitted by her varied very much, and appeared to depend upon her mood" (p. 323).

Eusapia, however, did use various other psychological ruses. For example, a much longer treatise would be needed to discuss her use of sexual calls: "as a rule she is apparently overwhelmed by sleep, throws herself often into the arms of her neighbours" (p. 324); "sometimes she encircled the leg of one of the controllers tightly between her own or rested both her legs across his knees" (p. 327); "Medium asks us to put our hands on her legs" (p. 352); "my right hand was then also grasping her thigh" (p. 364). It is clear that such behaviours could be used in many ways by a medium to her advantage.

Interesting also is her use of misdirection; Eusapia, for example, would frequently hold an experimenter's hand high, toward the curtain, and while the attention was on the hand she could kick the curtain below, thus producing movements and bulges in it: "Medium holds my right hand towards the left curtain with hers and makes two slow movements which are reciprocated by movements of the curtain" (p. 353).

Here is a description of an attempt at misdirection to cover a foot substitution, which was detected by the skilful experimenters at Columbia University; the one talking is W. S. Davis (Houdini, pp. 56-57):—

We were next favored with responsive raps,—doubling up her hands she beat the air with her fists in a jerky, spasmodic way when we heard the light noises on the wood. The exhibition above board did not occupy our entire attention. Every one in the party was interested in the theory of using a foot as a lever to raise the table. As she beat the air with her clenched fist, she correspondingly slid her feet away until we felt the pressure on the toe end of our feet only, whereas there had previously been pressure on the insteps. Kellogg and I both suspected that she had succeeded in removing one foot and was making the other do duty for two.

The two magicians hiding under the table later confirmed that this was what had exactly taken place.

Finally, Eusapia tried hard to appear co-operative and ready to do her best to make the experimenters happy; she would, for example, ask for better light only to have her 'control', 'John King', refuse it:—

In the early stages of trance the directions for diminution of the light are usually given through tilts or levitations (sometimes apparently without contact) of the table. Eusapia herself frequently opposes these directions, but as a rule the table continues, by repeated series of five tilts, often of great violence, to demand a reduction of light to which she ultimately gives way. [p. 325]

John tilts five times for less light. Medium is annoyed and says "No." The tilts continued to ask for less light and eventually she yielded. [p. 467]

Throughout the report, there are many instances that show where she appears to co-operate only to have things then go her way: "Eusapia was in a nervous, anxious mood, perpetually interrupting to ask if the control was satisfactory, and perpetually rendering it as difficult as possible for us to make it so" (pp. 325-6).

#### WHAT THEY COULD HAVE DONE

Since this paper has also been written to point out the various pitfalls of one of the most famous psychic investigations, and thus to stress further the need for future investigations to be carried out and reported in such a way as to

minimize retrospective counter-explanations, in closing we would now like to offer a few suggestions as to what the experimenters might have done to prevent being tricked (or, at least, to be conscious of what happened).

First of all, as we have seen, F. C. and B. go to great lengths to ensure that every request of Eusapia be satisfied. Since the main reason for a new SPR investigation was "merely to attempt to determine whether the phenomena were due to trickery or not" (p. 319), it would have been wise to attempt testing her under 'controlled conditions', sometimes. They do not do this since, as they explain: "our time in Naples was limited", and "we preferred to adopt conditions to which the medium was used and in which therefore it was probable that the effects would be produced, rather than impose others which might possibly impede the production of what we had gone to study" (p. 322).

To let Eusapia act under the conditions she was used to was not a bad idea: this is the best way to see how 'usual conditions' and 'test conditions' that would prevent fraud differ. However, after a few of these tests, where phenomena were produced under the usual conditions, new tests with stricter controls needed to be tried. Should nothing have happened under these conditions, what conclusions would have had to be drawn?

Luckily, somebody did attempt exactly this kind of test on Eusapia: it was the same committee from Columbia University who had hidden two persons under the experimenters' chairs to observe Eusapia's substitution of feet. Their plan, in fact, was to allow Eusapia to go through her act in the first part of the séance, so that they could see exactly what she did. After thirty minutes, however, at a given signal, the experimenters (two magicians) sitting at her sides tightened the controls. Eusapia's hands and feet were completely controlled, and they would not allow her to shift or get either free. She cursed and shrieked, of course, but during this period of tight control nothing else happened. Then again, at the agreed-signal, the controls were loosened for 30 more minutes and manifestations were again produced by the skilful use of a free hand or foot. In the end they tightened controls and again nothing happened. In this way they had been able to establish a kind of conditional relationship: whenever the controls were loosened, phenomena occurred. When they were securely tightened, there were no manifestations (Rinn, 1950).

In Naples the experimenters did not follow this kind of action: "We felt," they explained (Report, p. 322), "that if, in a reasonable number of experiments, persons specially versed in conjuring tricks and already forewarned concerning, and familiar with, the particular tricks to be expected, were unable to discover them, it would not be presumptuous to claim as a probable consequence that some other agency must be involved." Quite a wrong consequence, as we have seen. Even at the Columbia University sittings, the two *professional magicians* sitting at Eusapia's sides were not at all sure whether she had substituted her feet or not (Davis, quoted in Houdini, 1926, p. 56): "Kellogg and I both *suspected* that she had succeeded in removing one foot and was making the other do duty for two" [*italics ours*]. However they were not sure of what had really happened until, after the séance, the two persons hiding under the chairs confirmed that she had actually been able to substitute her foot in that way.

Eusapia complained that her limbs were too sensitive to be kept too tight, and we know how the Feilding group was careful not to hurt her sensitivity.

However, just once, they could have tried a couple of very simple controls: (1) move the séance table 5 ft. away from the curtains at the back; (2) rotate the table, so that Eusapia would sit at the centre of the longer side. If anything still happened inside the cabinet, or if the table still levitated on all four legs in such conditions, *then* something interesting would have really been observed. To be honest, they did try this second control during Séance VII, but after almost an hour, where there were only partial levitations of the table, mainly tilts toward the medium, Eusapia said that "she did not like the table that way" (p. 471) and it was again turned back in the usual position for good.

They could have also asked her to dress in white clothes, which could have allowed the experimenters to see her movements better; also, she could have been asked to dress in trousers, instead of ample skirts; or they could have had her sit on a creaking chair (notice that the chair, on which she is shown sitting in the picture facing p. 321, is different from the other one shown in the same picture and from those shown in the picture facing p. 375; these chairs were obviously the ones already present in the hotel room: but did Eusapia also bring her 'tested/silent' chair, along with table and curtains?). Ironically, many other suggestions of this kind were proposed by Count Perovsky-Petrovo-Solovo in the same *Proceedings* issue which contained the Feilding Report.

The only new test they try is to put 'stocks' on the legs of the table to prevent the medium's feet from levitating the table. However, they then discover that she can still move the table by using her hands. Given that the experimenters are now aware of this, she has to present different phenomena but, this time, she is caught at the substitution of hands. Not to worry, however, since the experimenters, as usual, decide that "no deliberate conscious fraud was proved" (p. 378).

#### CONCLUSIONS

We do not know whether Eusapia Palladino was a genuine medium or not. However, we observe that: (1) her best demonstrations were those held with no real controls and in front of people incompetent as regards tricks; (2) whenever she was observed by competent researchers she was invariably seen to be using fraud. It has often been claimed that the best experiments done on Eusapia are those by the Feilding group; from what we have seen, however, we can consider the Feilding committee a group of highly incompetent researchers. On the basis of these observations, we strongly suspect that Eusapia Palladino was only a very good magician, who depended on her highly polished and rehearsed methods of deception for her living and who, probably, did not need any accomplice to accomplish any of the 470 phenomena described in the Report. The gullibility of her experimenters was enough.

CICAP

Comitato Italiano per il Controllo  
delle Affermazioni sul Paranormale  
P.O. Box 60  
27058 Voghera (PV), ITALY

Via Colombo 9/5  
55048 Torre del Lago (LU), ITALY

MASSIMO POLIDORO

GIAN MARCO RINALDI

REFERENCES

- Barrington, M. R. (1992) Palladino and the invisible man who never was. *JSPR* 58, 324-340.
- Barrington, M. R. (1993) Palladino, Wiseman and Barrington: ten brief replies. *JSPR* 59, 196-198.
- Feilding, E., Baggally, W. W. and Carrington, H. (1909) Report on a series of sittings with Eusapia Palladino. *Proc SPR* 23, 309-569.
- Fontana, D. (1992) The Feilding Report and the Determined Critic. *JSPR* 58, 341-350.
- Fontana, D. (1993) Palladino (?) and Fontana: the errors are Wiseman's own. *JSPR* 59, 198-203.
- Hansel, C. E. M. (1989) *The Search for Psychic Powers*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books.
- Hodgson, R. (1895) The value of supernormal phenomena in the case of Eusapia Palladino. *JSPR* 7, 36-79.
- Houdini, H. (1924) *A Magician Among the Spirits*. New York: Harper & Brothers. [reprint: Arno Press, 1972].
- Jastrow, J. (1910) Unmasking of Palladino. *Collier's Weekly* 45 (May 14), 21-22; quoted in: Hansel, C. E. M. (1989) *The Search for Psychic Powers*, 242.
- Johnson, A. (1908) On the automatic writing of Mrs. Holland. *Proc SPR* 55, 276-277.
- Miller, D. S. (1910) Report on an investigation of the phenomena connected with Eusapia Palladino. *Science* 77.
- Munsterberg, H. (1910) Report on a sitting with Eusapia Palladino. *Metropolitan Magazine* (February); quoted in: Hansel, C. E. M. (1989) *The Search for Psychic Powers*, 240-241.
- Rinn, J. F. (1950) *Sixty Years of Psychical Research*. New York: Truth Seeker Company.
- Wiseman, R. (1992) The Feilding Report: A Reconsideration. *JSPR* 58, 129-152.
- Wiseman, R. (1993a) Palladino and Barrington: ten major errors. *JSPR* 59, 16-34.
- Wiseman, R. (1993b) Palladino and Fontana: nine major errors. *JSPR* 59, 35-47.
- Wiseman, R. (1993c) Martínez-Taboas, Francia and Palladino: nine major errors. *JSPR* 59, 130-140.